

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0414

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 06916

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: CGEN
SUBJECT: OVERSEAS VOTING PROCEDURES

1. EMBASSY NOTED RECENT NEWSPAPER REPORT THAT HEARINGS ON BILL TO AMEND 1975 OVERSEAS CITIZENS VOTINGS RIGHTS ACT SCHEDULED TO BEGIN MARCH 8. ACCORDING TO ARTICLE PROPOSED LEGISLATION WOULD GIVE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE RESPONSIBILITY FOR COLLECTING AND DISSEMINATING ABSENTEE VOTING INFORMATION TO ALL CITIZENS OVERSEAS AND WOULD RECOMMEND DEVELOPMENT OF STANDARDIZED ABSENTEE REGISTRATION AND BALLOT APPLICATION FORMS.

2. BASED ON OUR EXPERIENCE LAST FALL THERE IS GREAT NEED TO IMPROVE ELECTORAL PROCESS FOR OVERSEAS VOTERS. APPROXIMATELY 3,000 AMERICANS CAME TO THE EMBASSY TO HAVE FPCA'S OR STATE ABSENTEE BALLOT APPLICATIONS NOTARIZED BY CONSULAR OFFICER. IN ADDITION TO TIME DEVOTED TO NOTARIAL SERVICES, MUCH TIME WAS DEVOTED TO PERSONAL AND TELEPHONE INQUIRIES, MOST OF WHICH HAD TO BE REFERRED TO STATE VOTING AND TAX OFFICIALS.

3. ALTHOUGH A FEW STATES, NOTABLY NEW YORK, TOOK 1975 ACT INTO ACCOUNT IN PREPARING REGISTRATION FORMS SENT TO OVERSEAS VOTERS, OTHER STATES TYPICALLY MAILED MATERIAL OBVIOUSLY INTENDED FOR EITHER MILITARY
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OR DOMESTIC ABSENTEE VOTERS WHICH WAS LARGELY IRRELEVANT FOR INDIVIDUALS ENFRANCHISED UNDER THE NEW LAW. FOR EXAMPLE, MANY STATES REQUIRED VOTERS TO SIGN AN AFFIDAVIT ON ENVELOPE IN WHICH BALLOT WAS RETURNED WHICH STATED THAT THE VOTER CURRENTLY MAINTAINED A RESIDENCE IN THE STATE. AS A RESIDENCE PER SE IS NOT REQUIRED IN ORDER TO VOTE UNDER 1975

ACT, MUCH CONFUSION RESULTED. VOTERS WERE RELUCTANT TO MAKE AN UNTRUE STATEMENT BUT WERE ALSO FEARFUL THAT FAILURE TO SIGN THE AFFIDAVIT WOULD MEAN THAT THEIR BALLOT MIGHT NOT BE COUNTED. CONSEQUENTLY, LARGE NUMBERS OF VOTERS MADE HANDWRITTEN CHANGES IN THE AFFIDAVITS THUS FURTHER SLOWING VOTING PROCESS.

4. IN CONSIDERING USE BY THE STATES OF UNIFORM ABSENTEE REGISTRATION AND BALLOT APPLICATION FORMS WE HOPE THAT THE RELATIVELY FEW STATES THAT NOW REQUIRE NOTARIZATION OF THE BALLOT ENVELOPE ITSELF COULD BE PERSUADED TO DROP THIS REQUIREMENT IN FUTURE ELECTIONS. WE SEE DESIRABILITY OF VERIFYING IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP OF ALL INDIVIDUALS INITIALLY APPLYING FOR ABSENTEE REGISTRATION AND/OR BALLOTS, BUT WE FAIL TO SEE NEED TO REQUIRE VOTER TO RETURN TO EMBASSY SECOND TIME WITH BALLOT IN HAND FOR STILL ANOTHER NOTARIAL SERVICE AS SOME STATES DO. SOME SIMPLE DEVICE SUCH AS SERIAL NUMBERS FOR OVERSEAS BALLOTS COULD DISCOURAGE ANY CHEATING IF THAT IS PRIMARY STATE CONCERN. IN ANY CASE, IT SEEMS HIGHLY UNLIKELY THAT ANY OVERSEAS VOTER WOULD BE TEMPTED TO TRAVEL TO BIG-CITY EMBASSY LIKE PARIS, STRUGGLE TO FIND PARKING PLACE AND STAND

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IN LINE FOR NOTARIAL SERVICE JUST TO STUFF A BALLOT BOX WITH ONE OR TWO EXTRA BALLOTS THAT HE MIGHT BE ABLE TO OBTAIN IF THERE WERE NO CHECKS VIA NOTARIAL SERVICE.

5. WE NOTED THAT SOME STATES DID NOT REQUIRE

NOTARIZATION OF BALLOT ENVELOPE BUT ASKED VOTER TO HAVE HIS SIGNATURE ON ENVELOPE WITNESSED BY ANOTHER AMERICAN CITIZEN. THIS IS FINE AND DANDY BUT SOME VOTERS STILL CAME TO EMBASSY AND INSISTED THAT CONSULAR OFFICER WITNESS THEIR SIGNATURE.

6. IN PARTICULAR, EVEN THOUGH DEFENSE DEPT INVOLVED IN PROCESS, WE HOPE THAT FEDERAL POSTCARD APPLICATION FORM (FPCA) CAN BE PRODUCED IN CIVILIAN FORMAT AS WELL AS MILITARY FORMAT. MANY PEOPLE COMPLETING PRESENT FPCA ARE CONFUSED BY MILITARY TERMINOLOGY AND ASK UNNECESSARY QUESTIONS ON HOW TO FILL IT OUT.

7. FINALLY WE HOPE DEPARTMENT HAS INPUT INTO HEARINGS WITH VIEW TO ACHIEVING MOST EFFICIENT AND SIMPLE VOTING PROCESS THAT WILL PUT LEAST BURDEN BOTH ON VOTER AND CONSULAR OFFICER.
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